THE OGDEN STANDARD

SALLY PRUE DEVELOPS A TASTE *for* ART

BY ELISE WILLIAMSON.

"I'M goin' to get a guide book to this here Metropolitan Museum of Art. I allus says that pictures is jes' like preserves—yew can't make head nor tail of 'em if they ain't labelled!"

I turned upon hearing this remarkable statement to behold a little old lady who was herself fondly, though unconsciously, labelled "New England."

Her prim little figure was dressed in black alpaca. Her neckwear was of spotless white, and above it rose her delicate, sharp featured face. But the real personal touch to the old lady was her bonnet.

That bonnet was a delight—a bit of millinery that was a masterpiece of expression. It was self-assured—even aggressive. It was unyielding and orthodox. It had been created for its wearer and no other, and she wore it as a part of herself. It was fashioned of mourning silk and a bit of jet that stood up straight as a ramrod. I had thought the species extinct.

"Oh, most upright judge!" I murmured as I gazed upon it. "Little mercy would I hope from you if you knew my secret sin of this very minute. Here in the Metropolitan Art Museum, and with scarcely two coins to clink together and out of work!" The little old lady had in charge a limp female whom I felt sure she had piloted thither in perfect safety across the most crowded thoroughfares, for even the callous heart of a New York cab horse must needs have respected the authority vested in that bonnet.

"What an aid it would be to the policeman," I thought, "if only a pattern might be obtained!"

The check man suggested that he relieve the old lady of her umbrella and three parcels, so I left them, rushed through the little brass revolving gate and stood in the quiet rotunda of the museum.

I wandered about without a guide, just led solely by my instinct and taste. I came at last to a bronze group that puzzled me. It was utterly different from anything else. It made me catch my breath sharply.

It was the nude figure of a woman, one foot a-tiptoe, the other lifted as if treading upon air. The figure was slight, almost spiritlike, only very human, too. In one upraised hand was a cluster of grapes and in her face a wild, mad, insane joy. In the left arm she held an infant whose body and face mirrored the emotions of hers, but in its own infantine way—as the stars give light even as the sun. The baby hands reached for the fruit and the face was drunk with the unknown dream of desire. There was something unholy about it, and yet it was not coarse nor immoral, because it was real.

"What is it—what is it?" I thought. I had never heard of the MacMonnies Bacchante.

"It must be the sensuality of excess," I thought.

Just then the little old lady and her charge came along. The bonnet bristled with disapproval.

"I'm jes' showin' yew this because it's here," the old lady explained, "an' long's yew're here yew might as well see it all. But it's a slander to the sex, sich er thing. But the newspapers dew tell erbout sich carryin's on among them big rich folks thet they's no tellin' ef there ain't more trewth than poetry in it, jes' like the same."

The limp female turned toward her in mild horror. "Oh, Cousin Effy! I wouldn't say that now. 'Taint tinder Christian."

"Well," replied the old lady tartly, "ef 'taint so why's it here then?"

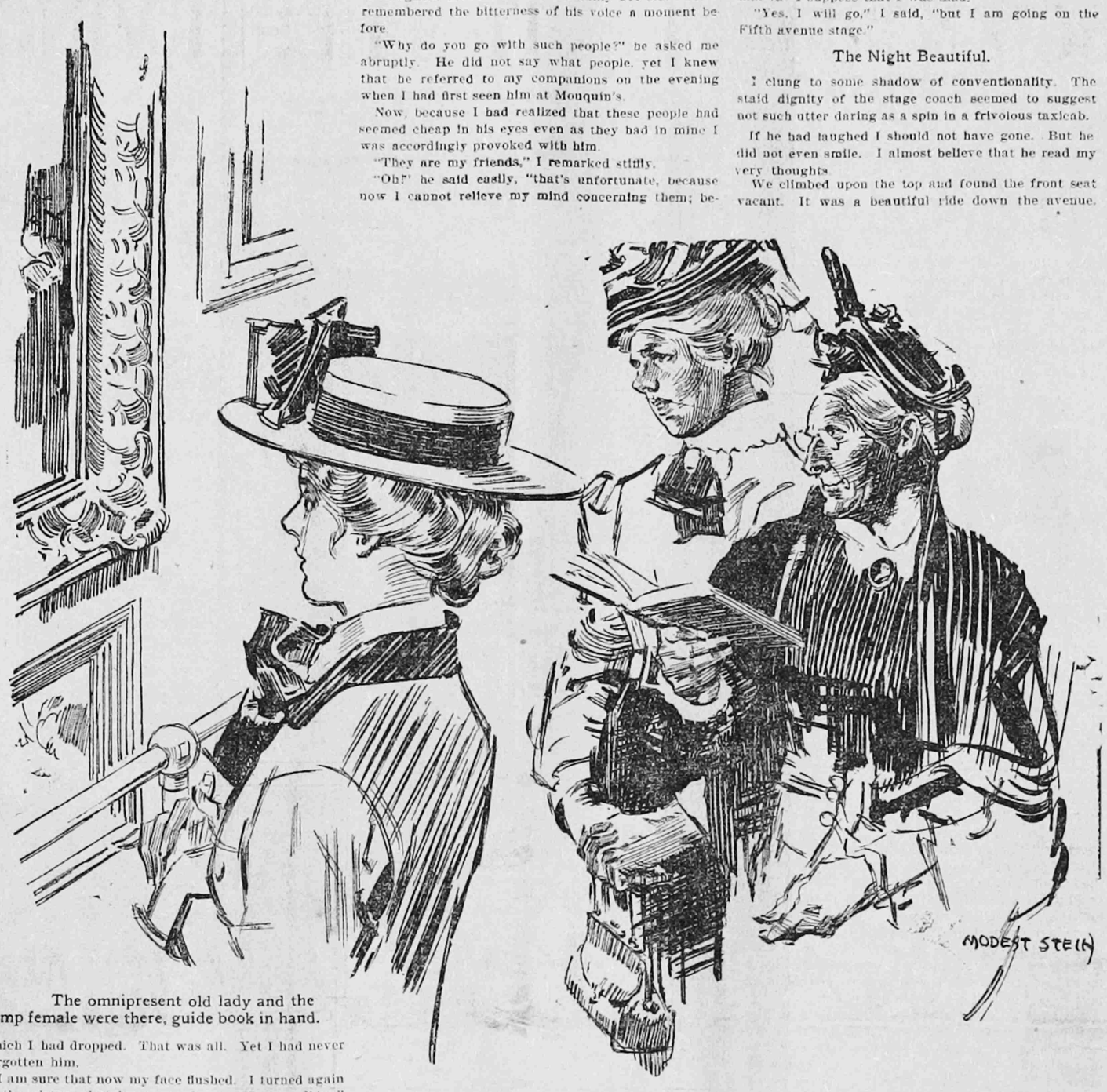
The limp female vouchsafed no response. They passed on and the Bacchante laughed.

I climbed more stairs and came to where the paintings were. My heart beat quickly with a pleasure I had never experienced before.

I had never dreamed that pictures could hold a message for me, something that I could not translate into words, only just feel.

There was one painting of the sea, the fresh salt sea, with the sun upon it and laughing mermaids sporting in the waves. All of a sudden I knew that I, too, had seen these merfolk and known and loved them, only I had not the magic power of calling them up before others' eyes. I realized for the first time something of the marvel of art, and a strange longing for this magic power came to me like a faint wind and was gone. After that I seemed to move in a dream, drinking in the beauty of what I saw as a parched flower drinks in the rain.

There was, oh! such a tiny canvas beside these larger ones that held me long. I have since learned that it is called "The Questioner of the Sphinx."



The omnipresent old lady and the limp female were there, guide book in hand.

The Man Appears.

There at the lips of that gigantic mystery, portrayed upon so small a canvas, a worn, ascetic figure bent listening. At the lips of the eternal silence the ear of faith!

I was glad that the old lady of the bonnet was not near. It is best sometimes to be alone. After a time I went on. At the end of one of the rooms hung a very large canvas, Bastien Lepage's "Jeanne d'Arc." But I did not know this at the time. I only knew that here was something to bring the swift tears, here was a strange new beauty that I had never seen portrayed before, a beauty of the spirit alone, a white flame that burned within, making holy the rough outer temple. Oh! I can see now that figure of the Maid of Orleans, the heavy peasant body clad in coarse homespun and the face of her transfigured, blue gray eyes wide and gazing at the vision of things to be, listening to the voices of the three who spoke. The one is armor, the veiled one and that other one who wept.

The light of truth was now to be shed upon my ignorance. The omnipresent old lady and the limp female were there, guide book in hand.

"That's Johann of Arc," the old lady announced, looking critically over her glasses. As there was no response she turned toward her charge, who, perceiving that something was expected of her, coughed deprecatingly and remarked—

"She looks like she has lots of strength of character, Cousin Effy"——

"She's seein' things," said the old lady.

Oh! I did want to laugh. I turned away to find myself gazing into a pair of amused eyes. I smiled, because for the moment humor had vanquished personality. Here was a human creature who laughed with me. But a sudden warning flashed to my brain. I remembered not to smile into strange eyes. But were these eyes strange?

With the speed of light these thoughts came to me. My gaze fell upon the man's hands—long, slim, curiously white.

"The man from Mouquin's," said my heart. This man I had seen once before in Mouquin's restaurant. He had courteously returned to me a handkerchief which I had dropped. That was all. Yet I had never forgotten him.

I am sure that now my face flushed. I turned again to the picture, but it was no longer "Jeanne d'Arc" that I saw. The very atmosphere of the place seemed surcharged with this one man's presence.

I moved leisurely on and though he did not follow I felt him near. After many wanderings I came upon a single group in marble. It was called "Mother." There was no need of explanatory title here. The chaste figure of a woman knelt, holding within the circle of her arms a babe asleep. Such adoration! Such utterly pure love! So might Mary have held her little Son, all unguessing of Calvary.

There were tears in my eyes. I put out my hand and touched the little baby softly; it seemed just asleep.

"You may awaken him," said a soft, mocking voice in a sort of tender raillery. The tone subtly implied the privilege of long tried friendship.

I did not turn, because of the tears, but I knew who stood beside me, and I trembled.

"Come," said the man from Mouquin's gently, "there is a picture that you have missed. I want you to see it."

He stood beside me waiting courteously, patiently. He said no more than that and yet I went with him. Why? I do not know. Ask the fishermen who hear the sirens sing why they go out to the reefs.

We went again through the galleries and I saw with his eyes beauty that I had not dreamed of before. He explained everything to me, made me understand what until then I had but dimly guessed. And always in that mocking, half scornful voice of his.

It did not seem strange to be walking there beside him. I had the queerest feeling of having shared some common past with him. It was like the memory of a dream. Now and then I would start at a certain tone of his voice as if something were almost recalled—what I could not tell.

His presence filled me with peace and at the same time a surging restlessness and a fear.

When the gong sounded for closing up time I could scarcely believe it was so late. We went out together.

"It is beautiful in the Park now," he said. "Shall we walk? Or perhaps you would prefer to ride?"

Such gentle assurance. I could not help but smile. After all, why not? The old rebellion against conventionality possessed me. I looked at him and laughed.

"If you are sure that it will not interfere in any way with your plans I should prefer to walk," I said.

We turned into the Park.

Suddenly I looked at him. "You remind me of some one whom I have known, but I cannot recall who it is."

He gazed down upon me from under lowered lids. "You remind me of some one whom I have never known, but I know quite well who it is," he said.

I retreated hastily.

"You know a great deal about art," I remarked.

"Perhaps," he smiled, "but not so much as you."

I was angry.

The Loved Art.

"I know nothing whatever," I replied with icy dignity. "You could hardly have failed to observe that."

"On the contrary, I observed that you knew more than I," he repeated, quite unruffled. Then his face changed to an expression I could not read. "Whereas I have only a carefully cultivated taste for art, the love of it is in your blood."

I was startled at the wave of bitter feeling that swept his voice, a wave crested with envy that broke upon his final words. Almost instantly his face became again masklike, enigmatical.

"So much for youth and the joy of fresh emotion," he said lightly.

I laughed, because he was certainly not old. Yet I remembered the bitterness of his voice a moment before.

"Why do you go with such people?" he asked me abruptly. He did not say what people, yet I knew that he referred to my companions on the evening when I had first seen him at Mouquin's.

Now, because I had realized that these people had seemed cheap in his eyes even as they had in mine I was accordingly provoked with him.

"They are my friends," I remarked stiffly.

"Oh!" he said easily, "that's unfortunate, because now I cannot relieve my mind concerning them; besides it must be beastly inconvenient to have friends that seem ridiculous to you."

I turned toward him fiercely.

"Oh, come now!" he said, laughing softly. "They were ridiculous, you know—cheap and absurd, with their would-be Bohemian airs. You saw it, too; I read it in your face."

"Well, I was their guest," I protested with heat.

"Yes," he agreed, "and that brings us back to the original question. Why do you go with such people?"

"Because I am lonely," I defended angrily, "and they are the only people I know." I regretted the words the moment I had spoken. He was silent for a while and then said:—

"You are a wise little one to know the reason why, and that is just the reason, I dare say. It is the loneliness that drives us to do many things, Little Wise One. It is because of the loneliness that I am here now talking to you."

His voice caressed as the sea caresses with the power to hurt withheld. What did the loneliness mean for him? Evidently not a lack of means. My woman's intuition prompted:—"There was some woman, perhaps, from whom he was separated."

A swift, fierce sensation swept me that made me acutely unhappy. It was gone in a moment, but it had left me startled. Surely I was not jealous? Of whom? Because of what? About a strange man whom I should probably never see again, I demanded angrily of myself.

What an absurdity! I was a little afraid.

"It is growing late. I shall have to be starting home now," I said, turning toward Fifth avenue.

"Yes," he agreed cheerfully, "it is a long way to No. 3— West Thirty-first street."

"How do you know where I live?" I demanded.

"Well, you see," he replied slowly, "perhaps you remember that night when you were returning from Mouquin's. Just as you had reached your boarding house a taxicab slowed up alongside the curb so that the man inside could light his cigarette, you see. I was that man, and I—er—just chanced to notice the number. As I was saying, it is a long way to Thirty-first street. So we had better find a cab."

"Now," I thought, "it is time to put a stop to this."

"I am going to catch the Fifth avenue stage," I remarked with unmistakable emphasis.

"What a lark!" he cried, with apparently unfeigned delight. "And we'll ride on top!"

I could not help but smile. It was too absurd. Then his face sobered.

"I say, Little Wise One, be reasonable. The loneliness is to blame. If you go home by yourself you will have to face it and so will I. Come on to Mouquin's and let's have a bite to eat and we'll listen to the music. Then we'll go below stairs and have our liqueur and listen to more music. Then you never will go to Mouquin's ever again without thinking of me. Come on! I'm better than the loneliness."

I thought of the boarding house. The musty, dim-lit stairs and the tiny cubbyhole at the top that was my bedroom. It would be dark and silent. There would be no music there, and oh! I knew how the loneliness would mock me. That fearful loneliness that I was beginning to dread.

This was a stolen day, it should be sweet on to the end. To-morrow might dawn cruel and exacting, with its stern problem of work to be found. But this hour was mine. Not the thought of anything should mar it. I suppose that I was mad.

"Yes, I will go," I said, "but I am going on the Fifth avenue stage."

The Night Beautiful.

I clung to some shadow of conventionality. The staid dignity of the stage coach seemed to suggest not such utter daring as a spin in a frivolous taxicab.

If he had laughed I should not have gone. But he did not even smile. I almost believe that he read my very thoughts.

We climbed upon the top and found the front seat vacant. It was a beautiful ride down the avenue. At Twenty-eighth street we alighted and walked across to Mouquin's. We were early, so a table was easily procured, not too far from the music, not too near.

An air of utter well being possessed me. Only I wished that I had been beautifully dressed like some of the women. But he paid no attention to them whatever, only to me. He ordered cocktails. I did not drink much of it because I had not had anything to eat for hours. He did not urge me.

I do not remember really eating, though, of course, I did, but it was more the atmosphere of the place that I drank in—the sense of real companionship. I had not realized how I had hungered for it. The music was more potent than the wine to set my blood to dancing. And that most subtle of intoxications—the power to charm—was mine and I was exerting it.

We dallied over our meal with many light jests and much laughter. By common unspoken consent we had agreed to put aside all curiosity concerning what we did not know of each other.

When the meal was finished we sat listening to the music. I told him a funny story and he had been laughing, when, with one of those swift transitions of mood that made him so inexplicable, he said, speaking seriously:—

"This time to-morrow night I shall be far out at sea."

"At sea?" I echoed blankly.

"Yes," he replied, "I leave for India to-morrow morning."

The waiter put beside him the tray with his change. Mechanically I watched him gather up all but a five dollar bill.

"It is the last evening, Jacques," he said, "for some time."

Jacques' eyebrows went up in surprise.

"Monsieur goes? I will be sorry not to serve Monsieur."

"Monsieur" leaned toward me.

"Shall we go below stairs for our liqueur? The woman sings there at this hour."

We descended the narrow stairs and came into the room where I had first seen him. The table in the corner that he had then occupied was held in reserve. We took it.

The waiter, without instruction, placed before him a box of cigarettes. He ordered liqueur and the waiter departed. I watched those slim white hands remove the cigarettes from the box and place them in his own plain gold case.

One of the musicians, a woman, sang. Her voice was hauntingly sweet:—

"Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar,
Where are you now?"

The words of the song stung my brain and fell like sparks upon my heart. As on that first night I raised my eyes from his hands to find his gaze upon my face. I flushed hotly. All my body shook with a strange fear. What had he read of my thought? What had been my thought? I was not quite sure.

"Why did you think my hands cruel that first night when you looked at them?" he asked, and laughed. "What is to become of you, Little Wise One, when I am gone to sea. Maybe you will marry some one just because of the loneliness."

"No, I will not," I cried almost angrily.

"Why?" He seemed a bit surprised at my vehemence.

"Because I shall never marry. I do not wish to."

He laughed. "Oh! Now that's too bad! I was just about to suggest that you come along to India with me. We could find a parson before curfew rings."

I laughed a trifle nervously, but faced his eyes bravely.

"I should never, never marry you in the world," I declared.

"And why, may I ask?" he questioned, amused.

"Because," I told him, "I could never be free. No one could ever be free who [I stumbled over the word] loved you."

He was silent for a moment with lowered eyes. Then he asked, softly:—

"And does it mean so much to you, Little Wise One, to be free?"

"It means everything in the world to me," I cried, "I cannot live if I am not free."

The liqueur arrived and was set before us. The waiter departed. There was nothing said for a few moments and then:—

"Does marriage mean that to you—an utter loss of freedom?"

"I do not know," I faltered. "Love means a lack of freedom, doesn't it?"

After a little while of silence he leaned across the table and looked deeply into my eyes.

"Great God! I wonder if you could understand!" he said.

I did not know what it was I was to understand, and I did not urge him to tell me; I was afraid.

"What is going to become of you, Little Wise One, when I am out on the sea? The loneliness is a devil of hell," he said, "and you have blood in your veins and you want to be free. I do not want you to go out ever again with those people you came here with the other night. Do you hear?"

The Surrender.

I opened my eyes wide at his tone of authority, but I did not resent it.

He did not ask me to promise. He only told me what he did not want me to do and then he changed the subject.

It was twelve o'clock when we left. It seemed so natural when he beckoned to the chauffeur of a waiting taxicab.

"Drive up Riverside," he ordered.

We went up Broadway as far as Seventy-second street, then crossed to the driveway. The river lay to the left like a long black shadow. There was a sprinkling of lights on the Jersey shore. It was starlight overhead and there was a sense of brooding peace in the air.

We rarely spoke. I do not know what my thoughts were, if I thought at all. I seemed in a dream.

We came at last to Claremont. It looked like fairyland, with its summer garden and lighted verandas. The far off sound of gentle gayety drifted to us. I was afraid that he might suggest that we stop, but he did not.

We turned here and started back. A cool salt breeze blew upon us.

"Oh! From the sea!" I cried in delight.

"You love the sea, don't you?" he said.

"More than almost anything in the world," I cried.

He leaned near, but did not touch me.

"Come with me to India, Little Wise One. We would be together on the sea. You could be as free as the air. I swear it. I would never try to hold you against your will. Marry me or not, as you please, only come with me."

I turned to him with frightened eyes.

"Oh, I could not do that! Do you not see? I could not marry you. I do not want to marry any one. And it would be wicked not to marry. Do you not see? I could not do that."

"Yes, I see," he said soberly. "You are a strange child."

I leaned back with closed eyes. Burning tears slipped from beneath the lids. I do not know why I cried.

We rode home to the boarding house in silence. When we got out he dismissed the cab. I gave him the key to unlock the storm door. We stepped into the vestibule. He unlocked the inner door and returned the key to me. As I took it from him his hand closed over mine.

I understood then why I had thought his hands cruel. The touch of them was a chain of fire that knew no mercy. It drew me to him. His arms were about me. His lips upon mine. I knew, for one brief moment, the glory of surrender. Then he pushed me roughly from him, but still holding my hands. His face was wild, like the sea in a storm, and he laughed the old mocking sea laugh, that was both tender and cruel.

"You have kissed me," he whispered fiercely. "You will never be free again. Never so long as you remember, and you shall remember so long as there is blood in your body. You little wild elf thing! You may marry whom you please, but you are mine, mine!"

Then he grew strangely calm. He turned my two hands over gently and laid his burning face in the palms of them.

"Oh, Little Wise One, Little Wise One!" he whispered, and was gone.

I stumbled blindly up the stairs and opened at last my door. It was even as he had said. The loneliness stabbed me; that tormenting loneliness that is a devil of hell.

I crept into bed and lay staring into the dark. I seemed wholly cut off from all the past of my life. Even the happening of the hours just gone by, the meeting with the man from Mouquin's, what he had said to me, and the touch of his lips upon mine seemed more symbolic of what might be rather than something that had actually occurred. I seemed utterly alone. The horror of it shook me.

Then into that dark hour there stole the sense of a presence infinitely sweet and calm. It was my mother who came to me in my need. She seemed to gather me into her arms just as she used to do when I was a little girl and soothed my troubled spirit into rest.

So the terror of loneliness crept away, and though I knew it was there, lurking in the dark, there was also love, and we are never alone so long as there is love.

"Oh, God, teach me to be strong!" I prayed in my heart. That was the first real prayer I had ever made.

And so ended the first lesson.